

THEMES ABSENT FROM POLICY DEBATE IN 1961

1. The thought that victory could be easily achieved: or achieved by continuing current and past programs and policies without change. Virtually every discussion of our policy in 1961 presented the challenge as a complex and difficult one that could be ~~made~~^{met} only by major departures, politically costly measures, considerable U.S. resolve and patience, reflecting an ^{appreciation} ~~appropriation~~ that high U.S. interests were involved. Although an official report^s and public statements in 1962 and later reflected considerable ^{optimistic} ~~over~~ contentions on the effectiveness of the limited U.S. support program undertaken, ^{These later} predictions were implicitly in strong contradiction of the earlier estimates prevailing in 1961, which tend to be sober and, in retrospect, fairly realistic (though, even so, ^{they} under-estimated the obstacles and ultimate requirements.) ~~So~~ ^{So} far as the record shows; though it is just possible that it is misleading on this point, in that private conversations may have taken a different tone). This was not the case in 1961. The U.S. commitments were ^{not} ~~undertaken~~ or increased in a mood of rosy optimism or wishful unrealism.

2. Equally absent, on the other hand, from DOD discussions was the possibility that victories in South Vietnam might be unattainable, or infeasible in the absence of certain changes or conditions which were unlikely to occur; thus, there was essentially no consideration in DOD proposals ^(except at memo by Bill Bundy) that U.S. policy might fail despite an unreserved commitment of U.S. resources to the problem. In particular, there was little mention of the possibility that the U.S. involvement could suffer the fate of

of the French efforts in 1946-54, and for some of the same reasons; the French example was not regarded as ominous, on the assumption that differences in French resources and military competence (as trainers, advisors, or combatants) and in political orientations, as colonialists, negated the comparison. (Though absent from DOD discussion, these considerations were hinted or mentioned in a few State Dept dispatches, notably one by Dean Rusk, in NIE's in 1960 and 1961, in a memo by Ambassador Galbraith and statements attributed to JFK by his recent biographies).

3. There is virtually no mention in the discussion policy in 1961 that increased measures of commitment or involvement -- for example, either those opposed by the Taylor measure or those larger measures addressed by the President in November and December 1961--were required under the present by past formal commitments of the U.S. to the Diem regime or other nations (SEATO). Although the positive effects demonstrating U.S. determination to halt the expansion of Communism and the negative effects of failing to do so were often mentioned, these were always considered in the context of foreign interpretation of U.S. unilateral policies, in pursuit of U.S. perceptions of U.S. current and future U.S. interests, in terms of the requirements of "keeping our word" or carrying out promises, treaties, or commitments.

It might also be noted that the following matters, all of them later matters of controversy and, in some cases, submerged at other intervals in high level policy discussion were present in major discussions during 1961:

- a. The possible need⁵ in fact, immediate requirement, for US combat forces;
- b. The possible need for threat or undertaking of a bombing campaign

against North Vietnam to deter or prevent infiltration or reverse North Vietnamese influence on the insurgency.

3. The importance of current and likely future infiltration from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia (although the possible infiltration of North Vietnam regular forces of division scale ^{also} was ~~little~~ considered).

4. The relevance of a settlement in Laos to the conflict in South Vietnam: its impact both upon infiltration and Vietnamese confidence in U.S. commitment.

4. Vietnamese and particularly Diemist doubts of U.S. resolve and backing for his regime.

6. The shortcomings of Diem's politics and methods of administration and his impact upon the insurgency (seen mainly by State and CIA -- not DOD).

7. The shortcomings of ARVN organization and performance; seen mainly in the same terms as later critiques in 1963-67. (Though blamed excessively upon Diem's intervention, lack of mobility, inadequate training, support or planning.)

THESIS ON VIETNAM

1. Laos and Vietnam.

Why was there a crisis concerning Vietnam in the fall of 1961?

No one believed, in Saigon and Washington, that Vietnam was in imminent danger of being taken over by the Communists, a fate which ^{had} ~~would~~, for example, threaten both neighboring Laos and distant Berlin at that exact time. It is true there had been a recent increase in Viet Cong terrorism and some ominous ^{ly} large attacks. Moreover, the estimates of Viet Cong strength were in the process of escalating sharply, an increase of 12,000 between April 1960 and September 1961, of which 4,000 was in the last three months; and infiltration was increasing through Laos. Nevertheless, both the estimated overall strength and the scale of infiltration appeared still quite small, relative to RVNAF strength and GVN resources. Why, then, was it necessary to send the President's Special Military Advisor, General Taylor, on a hurried trip to Vietnam in October 1961 to evaluate ^a ~~the~~ proposal to send U.S. combat forces immediately to the aid of the South Vietnamese; ^{an impending} ~~a potential~~ decision of such consequence as to define the decision-making situation as a crisis?

The answer is that the crisis in Washington reflected a crisis in Saigon: a crisis of confidence. In turn, the hemorrhage of trust in U.S. commitment and resolve among Vietnamese leaders was a response -- and was seen as such by U.S. policy-makers -- to U.S. (Presidential) decision-making in the spring and summer of 1961,

primarily with respect to Laos but also in theatres more remote from Vietnam. In short, the pressures to which the President responded ultimately in November and December 1961 by increasing the explicit U.S. commitment to the fate of South Vietnam and the physical presence of the U.S. in the Vietnam conflict were largely themselves a ^{consequence} response to decisions that the President had taken earlier, elsewhere; and the fact that the President and his advisors perceived this relationship had great bearing on the President's ^{positive} ~~own~~ ^{these} response to pressures for commitment from the Vietnamese and from his advisors. Yet, the Laos experience, and the on-going negotiations concerning Laos, tempered the Presidential decisions in still other ways, ^{on the side of restraint,} as well, playing a strong role in causing him to reject recommendations for considerably stronger commitments than those to which he agreed.

Without the decisions that he had made earlier in 1961 in Laos, Cuba and Europe, it seems ~~to me~~ less likely that the President would have made ^{adopted the precise policy} ~~the precise~~ decision that he did in Vietnam in November 1961; he might have opted either for considerably stronger measures, or considerably weaker, i.e. less committal; ^{not would he have been so likely to} As it was, what emerges clearly from the documentary record is that he chose a middle course of policy which had the effect of reaffirming U.S. commitment to ~~the~~ ambitious goals within South Vietnam, and backing up that commitment with an increased U.S. involvement that clearly raised the stakes for the U.S. in terms of prestige. ^{at the same time} While this ~~course~~ omitted virtually every one of the conditions ^{for} change within the GVN, for US/GVN relations, ~~or~~ for U.S. physical involvement, ^{that} ~~were~~ ^{was} pressed by one or another ^{in Vietnam or Laos or both}

adopt what were, in effect, divergent policies for Laos and Vietnam, treating them as separate problems.

Moreover, it put him in the position of reaffirming the importance

of his chief advisors as absolutely essential to the achievement of U.S. aims in Vietnam; indeed, ^{essentially} not only to the long-run ^{game} of defeating the Communists but to short-run goals of avoiding further deterioration. That ^{design} choice by the President, in the light of the analysis and recommendations presented to him, needs explaining in any case. Nor ^{are} ~~is~~ the data available to this study sufficient to narrow the possible explanations down to one. But, ^{a single} ~~it is~~ ^{they are} adequate to indicate that a certain set of considerations had strong influence upon the President's somewhat paradoxical choice of policy, and these considerations were ^{the} ~~a~~ consequence of his earlier decisions in related and remote areas.

Before presenting the evidence and argument in detail, I shall indicate the outlines of the thesis. Kennedy's decision to negotiate a settlement in Laos rather than to introduce U.S. forces with the aim either of blocking Communist advances to the borders of Thailand, blocking infiltration into Vietnam, or defeating Communist-led forces in Laos, inevitable generated certain pressures upon his future decision-making in SEA and elsewhere in the world. The consequences of his decision were of two kinds. First, it was generally anticipated that the negotiated settlement, however favorable it might appear on the surface, would be exploited by the North Vietnamese to increase their infiltration into South Vietnam through Laos; moreover, it seemed fairly likely that the Communists would exploit the general course of negotiations to nibble away at non-Communist resistance in Laos and achieve a de facto control of the country, with the resulting capability to put strong pressure on the border areas of Thailand. This anticipated

physical weakening of the security situations of these two countries,
predictably, increased their ^{and/or} sense of threat and need for U.S.

reassurance and assistance. But the ^{direct} psychological impact of the
decision could be expected to be, and was, even greater; ^{it} inevitably
called into question the determination of the U.S. to block the

advance of Communist influence and control in SEA, and perhaps else-
where in the world. ⁷ This was not so much a matter of creating
doubts about America's "word" or willingness to observe treaties.

It was clearly true that the U.S. was not compelled by the word or
even the spirit of any treaty to deploy combat forces to Laos to
prevent a Communist takeover; nor was this argued seriously by allies
or participants in the decision-making controversy. What was argued,
and what was undoubtedly true, was that many policy makers in SEA
and in the rest of the world did base their calculations ^{on} their
own security, their defense needs, and the desirability of varying
relations with the Communist or non-Communist world upon the assumption
that the U.S. believed that its own vital interests were involved in a
world-wide confrontation with (what was still perceived by the U.S. as)
the Communist bloc; and that these U.S. interests would be strongly
disadvantaged by any successful extension of Communist control, particu-
larly in an area where the U.S. had earlier evidenced direct interest ^{and concern}.

Thus, a ^{concrete} demonstration that there were limits to what we were willing

to do to prevent such an extension, ^{and specifically,} or places in the world ^{where we would not} to which we
~~could not attach such importance, as to define them if need be with~~

~~U.S. forces (whether bound by previous treaty or not) could be expected~~
^{would} to affect these worldwide calculations in a way adverse to our influence and

long run interests. The shock was bound to be greater immediately in SEA itself, because of an extreme ^{as a result of} awareness ~~and of the critical role~~ of U.S. assistance in the face of a vigorous ^{and} aggressive North Vietnam, and ^{because of} ~~was, moreover,~~ the physical impact upon border security of an extension of Communist control into strategically-located Laos. Thus, both the physical and psychological impact of Communist takeover of Laos (probably believed by most participants in the policy process ^{even in the U.S.} to be the eventual consequence of the negotiating path) would be the more or less quick expansion of Communist influence in Thailand, Cambodia, eventually SVN, and still later probably Malaysia and Burma. A retreat in Laos, then, ^{covered the seeds} ~~so deceives~~ of eventual loss of all of SEA; ^{a psychological defeat} ~~a withdrawal~~ believed ~~to be~~ of far greater symbolic significance -- encouraging opponents and dismaying allies -- than a setback in any one country of SEA considered by itself.

Moreover, the policy adopted in Laos, however ominous in itself, occurred in a context that seemed to reinforce its unfavorable interpretation and impact. It came at virtually the same time as a ^{Presidential} decision to cut losses in the Bay of Pigs, drawing back from the use of U.S. combat forces in an area ^{in circumstances} where ~~the~~ U.S. would have been regarded as ^{intervention} natural and predictable by both allies and enemies of the U.S., and notably by the Soviet Union. There is some evidence, indeed, that the ~~impact~~ ^{implications} of the Bay of Pigs ^{(for US (and specifically, Kennedy's) pattern of decision making)} ~~was~~ perceived even more sharply by the Soviet Union ^{and} ~~then~~ by neighbors of Laos, such as Thailand and South Vietnam, than the concurrent, similar decision-making in Laos. ^{PP then,} Both of these episodes were followed by a confrontation between Khrushchev and Kennedy in Vienna which left even the President with the feeling that Khrushchev misjudged him ^{underestimating his resolve,} in a way that was highly ominous for Khrushchev's likely

policy in Europe. Yet, although the President set out, in public statements and in actual preparations for a conflict in Europe, to dispel this impression in Khrushchev's mind in the summer of 1961, he found himself compelled to reinforce it by ~~choosing~~ a passive response to the erection of the ^{Wall} in Berlin and the abridgement of allied rights in East Berlin. This took place in August; in September, the Soviets began their brutal, blatant series of atomic tests in the atmosphere leading to the explosion of the trigger for ^a ~~the~~ 100 megaton weapon.

The audience for this sequence of provocations and U.S. responses was not alone the Soviet Union nor Western Allies; it included the U.S. public, in its various factions, and the civil and military bureaucracy upon which the President depended for ^{internal} support and whose ^{public} loyalty was equally essential for political reasons. There too, doubts were growing that the U.S., under this President, had the resolution, the courage, and the perception of U.S. interests in the cold war, to take ^{the risks and} ~~those~~ actions necessary to deter Communist adventures and to safeguard U.S. and allied security. The question was rising: Where, if anywhere, ^{would} ~~will~~ the U.S. hold the line?

That question became pointed with the crisis of confidence reported in Saigon in September and October of 1961. South Vietnam, unlike Thailand, was immediately under the gun. The issue confronting South Vietnamese leaders was ^{not,} to be sure, whether enough U.S. aid would be forthcoming to enable them to put down the current or a somewhat larger level of Communist threat. It related to U.S. actions in the event of a considerably worsened security situation, ^{and} ~~fed~~ by a much larger and prolonged scale of infiltration or the direct intervention

of North Vietnamese regular troops. Both of these contingencies they regarded as having been greatly increased in probability by events within Laos; whereas their confidence in the U.S. response to such actions had been simultaneously diminished by the stance taken by the U.S. in Laos. And, unless their confidence in the ultimate willingness of the U.S. to involve itself on a large scale, if need be, could be sustained, it was believed by U.S. advisors that Vietnamese morale and confidence would weaken so drastically as to paralyze efforts even to avoid short run deterioration. In such a psychological context, the end was likely to come soon.

What was needed, ^{then,} was a demonstration of U.S. ultimate commitment that would carry conviction to the South Vietnamese. This would not, as the President's representatives concluded, come cheaply to the U.S. Precisely ^{because} ~~the cause~~ of the strengths of the doubts raised by the President's decisions earlier in the year, nothing less than commitment of U.S. combat forces to Vietnam could so persuade the Vietnamese of U.S. backing as to induce them to make a sufficiently resolute fight themselves. The costs and risks of such a commitment were not deprecated by those who proposed ^{it but} ~~them~~; they argued that these costs were counter-weighted, ^{by} ~~in~~ the size of the stakes at issue and the urgency of the requirement.

Insert But, the President was in a dilemma. Other advisors, including trusted allies, assured him that to take this particular action of commitment -- U.S. combat forces to South Vietnam -- would jeopardize or even destroy the chances for a negotiated solution which was his aim in Laos. So blatant a violation of the Geneva Agreements of 1954 could not but negate, it was argued, the chances for a new negotiated

settlement in Geneva in 1962.

Other considerations, unquestionably, were to inhibit the President from an immediate commitment of U.S. combat forces. In particular, there was a question as to whether the aims of the U.S. could be achieved even with large scale U.S. combat forces; if they could not, what loomed was a large scale investment of U.S. prestige to an enterprise that might nevertheless end in failure.

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Thus, the pressures for commitment. They began to operate in April 1961 as soon as the basic Presidential decisions on a policy for Laos had been reached. Whatever the President's state of thinking about the security problems presented by SEA as a whole at that time -- and neither the available documents nor recent biographies are conclusive on this -- the President was certainly in no mind to write off U.S. interests in SEA, either publicly or within the councils of the Government. It was therefore essential at that time to adopt a stance that the problems of SVN and Laos were separable, and justified disparate goals and strategies, despite the fact that the absence of U.S. or other strong SEATO forces in the pan handle of Laos opened the prospect of increased infiltration into SVN. All the doubts and pressures that were to arise later could be foreseen as early as April, and led Kennedy to counter then with a program of increased U.S. aid and a trip by Vice President Johnson to Asia with the major purpose of reassuring these allies and, specifically Diem, of continued U.S. interest and resolve despite the apparent counter evidence of our Laos policy. The reaffirmation of policy and the Vice President's (acting under guidance) fullsome private and public endorsement/of Diem's leadership in Vietnam, of course, increased the likelihood that later requests for help from Diem would be made positively. But, although the DA, followed by the JCS, proposed in April and May that U.S. combat forces be deployed in SVN, both for psychological and operational effect, Diem still took, at the time of the Vice President's visit, the position that such forces were unneeded and would be politically counter productive. What changed in

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the course of the summer was less a worsening of the security situation within SVN as a weakening Vietnamese confidence in the assurances that the Vice President had carried, this as a result of events in Laos, where negotiations were showing little progress and the Pathet Lao were improving their position without provoking the U.S. into breaking off negotiations and _____ them with troops. The first strong indication of the impact this was having in Saigon was an unforeseen and unprecedented request by Diem for a bilateral defense treaty with the U.S. (contravening the Geneva Agreements of 1954). At the same time the events in Laos were generating strong pressures within DOD and in State/Defense working groups, for the implementation of SEATO plans or of unilateral U.S. deployments into LAOS; i.e., abandonment of the negotiated program. Such a deployment was presented by the JCS as the only adequate means of addressing the security problem of SEA as a whole. U.S. actions within SVN alone were described by the JCS as distinctly supplementary, or second best, to preventive action within Laos ^{and} ~~to~~ physical security not only of Laos but of Vietnam, Thailand and ultimately ^{Burma} ~~Malaya~~, Cambodia and Malasia. However, a concept was developed and endorsed by the JCS, with some White House and State backing, for intervention by U.S. combat forces in Vietnam alone. This was regarded as primarily, at the outset, a psychological measure defined to reassure the Vietnamese and stem over? an effective Vietnamese effort with a clearly implied commitment to follow the initial deployment with further U.S. forces if the Vietnamese effort should be inadequate, particularly in the face of increased infiltration from Laos. Although this was not regarded as a substitute for action within Laos itself, it is recommended as an interim measure pending resolution of U.S. policy in Laos (i.e.,

pending either acceptable success of negotiations or the unequivocal failure of the negotiation strategy to avoid takeover (regarded as far more likely) and as ^{containing} ~~condemning~~, to some degree, the costs of an unfavorable settlement within Laos and the resulting infiltration. ^{Facing?} ~~Facing?~~ this strong skepticism within the Defense establishment on the wisdom of viability of his course in Laos, the President was thus in no position to broaden the controversy by appearing to be resistant to the security needs of SVN as well, especially in advance of an immediate costly challenge; just as in April and May he could limit resistance to an externally unpopular approach to Laos only by limiting the evident scope of that policy within SEA. In short, even if he had been very strongly dubious of the necessity, warrant, or feasibility of successful defense of SVN against Communist tactics -- and it is not suggested here that his state of mind was this extreme -- the fall of 1961 would have been a peculiarly hard time for him to express his doubts in action.

In this setting of pressure from within his own bureaucracy to send Vietnam, and combat troops to Laos and/at least to Vietnam, came Diem's plea for a bilateral defense treaty: a plea delivered in a month which the Chief of the MAAG in Saigon described as "near panicky" relating it explicitly to developments in Laos. Just before the Taylor mission met with _____ in Saigon, Diem's Minister of Defense presented the U.S. Ambassador with a request for U.S. combat forces. Although in his first meeting with Taylor, Diem surprised the party by now bringing this up, it had just been related to them, Diem's response at a later meeting to the ^{Mission?} _____ of U.S. forces was _____ by Taylor ~~at~~ his own suggestion was strongly _____. Moreover, he announced that he had been canvassing Vietnamese

opinion and had found virtual unanimity even "within members of the opposition" on the desirability of U.S. forces. This unanimity of Vietnamese opinion was confirmed by U.S. mission report which again explicitly related the request in nearly every case of the need to reassure the Vietnamese whose doubts had been raised by Laos policy and developments.

To what amounted to a request from Diem for U.S. combat forces, Taylor added his own endorsement of the proposal which it had been a major part of his mission to assess. The basic reason for the necessity was stated promptly in the opening lines of Taylor's report:

"There was a crisis of confidence in Vietnam brought on by U.S. policy in Laos." [Check for exact wording.], or, as stated in the

opening sentence of a section headed "The Crisis in SVN":

"The principal elements involved in this crisis are clear enough:

(1) uncertainty that the seriousness of the American commitment to defend SVN induced by the Laos negotiations. Many people believe that the U.S. will be prepared to settle for a Souvanna in Saigon." The requests from Diem were, in themselves, a strong evidence for the sense of urgency and desperation in Saigon for Diem had avoided any such open reliances upon U.S. support in the past, feeling that it would expose him to costly charges by the Communists and other opposition elements that he was a puppet of the Americans, whereas in fact his stability to act independently and on the basis of Vietnamese resources had always been a source of particular pride to him.

Pushed by his defense establishment and his Presidential representatives, and pulled by the urgent requests from the GVN, one has enough explanation -- if explaining is needed -- why Kennedy did not,

in the fall of 1961, reduce or fail to increase the U.S. commitment to SVN. As Secretary of State Rusk commented to the Indian Ambassador, We cannot afford another Laos. Yet, he did not send troops. Again, ^{would} this ~~did~~ not seem to ~~call~~ for special explanation were it not for the urgency with which his advisors underlined the essentiality of U.S. combat forces~~x~~ in Vietnam precisely if the fate of ^{Laos} Vietnam were to be avoided. The ironic answer seems to be that the same ^{south} source of consideration that made it impossible for Kennedy to write down U.S. objectives and commitments in Vietnam as he had in Laos, made it inexpedient for him to adopt at that time his strong measures urged upon him as minimally adequate to a defense of U.S. aims in SVN. He was not ready to reconsider his Laotian policy; to regard the defense of Laos and of Vietnam as inextricably locked, to conclude that the defense of the area as a whole required a firm stand on the ground in Laos, to abandon negotiations and introduce U.S. forces into Laos. The reinforcement of our position in SVN, then, had to proceed under the constraint that it not interfere fatally with the prospects for a negotiated solution in Laos, and Kennedy was assured, not only by advisors in State, and by such interested parties as India, but by the British (through a particularly trusted advisor, David Ormsby Gore) that the introduction of U.S. combat forces would destroy chances for even superficially acceptable negotiations over Laos. It can be conjectured that this consideration alone was sufficient to lead Kennedy to postpone the deployment of U.S. combat forces (though other considerations were probably also worked in) despite the fact that the bulk of the advice reaching him stressed the urgency of this move measured in weeks ~~or~~ months if even short run gains

within Vietnam were to be achieved.

In still other ways, the earlier crisis that virtually compelled Kennedy to positive action in "drawing a line against Communism" in the fall of 1961 worked simultaneously to deter him from backing up that line as strongly and aggressively as he was urged by his advisors. First, while the earlier process of decision making had left many in his own bureaucracy, particularly military advisors, with doubts on his resolve and perception of U.S. security, the same set of interactions with these advisors had left Kennedy with strong reservations on the judgment and prudence of those advisors and with some suspicion of proposals that seemed designed to tie his hands with respect to future decisions. In this situation, the proposal for U.S. forces was explicitly ^{not} urged as a requirement to meet an enemy physical threat, but to reassure psychologically an ally; the President might well have read into it a device to achieve his own irrevocable commitment to the defense of ambitious aims in SVN, a commitment he was not yet prepared to make. He may, in other words, have suspected that this motive distorted the judgment that the deployment was required for psychological reasons in SVN to avoid immediate deterioration; He is reported by Hilsman to have maintained that the increase in U.S. advisors and combat support -- ultimately to manpower levels exceeding the deployment of combat forces initially proposed -- should be adequate to reassure Diem on the U.S. commitment (the actual affect on Diem's confidence, although ~~it~~ must be recalled that the increase in advisory effort offered by Kennedy was made in the context of a request by Diem for combat forces and of Diem's knowledge that the President's military assistant had endorsed

this proposal; the President's ultimate failure to offer combat forces could only be seen as an expression of a limited commitment, at least in the short run and whether this was strongly reassuring to Diem is open to doubt. In short, it is possible that the President doubted the estimates presented to him on the ^{immediate} ~~enemy~~ necessity for stronger measures.

Another interaction of distant ^{threats?} ~~threat~~s of crisis with Vietnam involved the President's reluctance in the fall of 1961 to become engaged in "a two-front war" (a comment he made to the Chairman of the JCS in November 1961) referring to the imminence of possible conflict in Europe with the Soviets over Berlin. Thus, while (according to Richard Goodman) the desire to signal resolution and determination to resist Communist advances to Khrushchev in the context of the Berlin crisis was as strong a motive as any other in Kennedy's mind in the fall of 1961 for taking a firm stand in SVN, his concern over Berlin was at the same time a deterrent against a diversion of resources to SEA with the probable consequence that it would lead to a seriously distracting combat involvement just at the time when attention would be needed for larger issues in Europe. Finally, there was the issue of whether the goals urged upon him for SVN -- and adopted by Kennedy as internal policy guidance -- were truly achievable by U.S. efforts in company with Diem, even with full scale U.S. commitment and use of ground troops. If they were not, the introduction of ground troops could only vastly increase the psychological and political concepts of an eventual defeat or unfavorable settlement. This possibility was never raised even as a remote contingency in any JCS discussion. And the issue of the

eventual outcome was held to depend only upon the degree of U.S. commitment; if the U.S. only communicated its resolve "to/^{do}whatever necessary" to defeat Communist purposes in SVN, and backed up that decision with resources, a favorable outcome ^{is} ~~was~~ assured. The price could be high, if the North Vietnamese and Chinese Communists came into the fight in force but it was still limited; JCS estimates, endorsed by Secretary McNam~~er~~^{er} and General Taylor, were that some 205,000 U.S. troops (accompanied with foreseeable SEATO commitments) would almost certainly be adequate in the ~~worse~~ ^{worst} case of North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist invasion. But there is reason to suspect that Kennedy found this assessment, too, suspect. Again, his confidence in the reliability of military estimates of feasibility had been shaken severely by what he had observed of military counsels and deliberations on Laos and the Bay of Pigs in the spring of 1961. But his deeper skepticism undoubtedly went back much further. Vietnam was one area on which he had formed personal opinions very early on the basis of some personal observation. And these opinions had led him to a controversial public position in Congress on the feasibility of the French efforts both in Indochina and Algeria. ^{Each} ~~He~~ one of the recent chroniclers of the Kennedy Administration has noted that Kennedy not only had the opinion that the war had been unwinnable for the French, but that what had happened to the French could happen to the U.S. This was a conclusion to which the Defense Department had been, in the seven years since Dien Bien Phu, particularly resistful to. In fact, in documents available to this study, the thought occurs as a possibility in only one piece of paper: a memo by Mr. Wm. Bundy who notes that the unfavorable

outcome risked by an increased U.S. involvement in SVN (which, on balance, he favored in the memo) was that "we end like the French."

But, even to those who saw such a possibility it was subject to further analysis. What had made the war unwinnable for the French was the political environment in which they fought: their colonialist motivations, and unwillingness to support a genuinely independent, nationalist Vietnamese leadership, and the resulting failure of the bulk of the Vietnamese population to identify with or participate in the fight against the Communist-led nationalist resistance. Likewise, what raised the spectre of a similar outcome for a US/GVN effort seven years later, were the disturbing similarities in the new situation to the old one, despite such striking disparities as the absence of a French involvement or similarly colonialist motivations on the part of the U.S. Scarcely more than Bao Dai did Ngo Dinh Diem, in 1961, attract the enthusiasm, dedication, loyalty or participation of the bulk of the Vietnamese population. This was true not because he was widely regarded as a puppet, as was Bao Dai -- on the contrary his credentials of nationalism, patriotism, and respectability in Vietnamese terms remained high to the end -- but because of quite other aspects of his political style he repelled and alienated block after block of Vietnamese society, excluding most of them from open participation in Vietnamese political life. In State Department and in CIA reporting and analysis through 1960, and into 1961 this was seen as a major factor threatening the stability of Diem's rule even against non-Communist opposition and making him vulnerable to a remote Communist threat.

And it was this factor that was seen by some individuals primarily outside the Defense Department as raising a question as to whether the war against the Viet Cong was winnable under Diem, even with full U.S. help, if Diem's approach to oppositionist elements did not change.

The clearest statement of this skepticism came in a cable from Dean Rusk who emphasized the urgency of obtaining commitments from Diem to broaden the political base of his regime and take other measures necessary to mobilize broad Vietnamese participation in the war. In the absence of such undertakings, Rusk expressed great reluctance to see a further commitment of U.S. prestige, such as would follow from a deployment of U.S. combat forces, to a losing ^{draw.} ~~reprise.~~

This view of the criticality of the Vietnamese effort suggests that a U.S. strategy that would make major U.S. commitment contingent on the fulfillment by the GVN of those reforms and ^{measures} felt to be essential to the success of a joint effort. Such a conditional offer would seem to be the tactic best designed to achieve those desirable reforms; yet, if it nevertheless failed, this failure would signal the infeasibility of achieving U.S. ambitions in Vietnam in any case. And this was, indeed, the tactic adopted by the President in his initial response to the Taylor/State/Defense recommendations. In light of what we know of advice reaching the President, this tactic must be seen as a response to advice (including the President's own ~~2~~ instance) primarily coming from outside the Defense Department, where the Vietnamese effort was not generally seen as absolutely critical to ultimate success, nor was political reform seen as essential to adequate Vietnamese participation. This advice was presumably not ^{likely} ~~likely~~ given, and it may well have accorded with the President's own intuition on the critical role of political factors within the conflict. Yet, when Diem proved resistant to the proposals

either for limited partnership with the U.S. or for political changes broadening his own regime, these U.S. aims, initially stated as flat conditions, if the U.S. were to carry out its own undertakings, were simply ^{disregarded} disrupted, or at least postponed indefinitely. (The validity of the concern expressed by Rusk and and a few others in the fall of 1961 was underlined dramatically two years later, when precisely these matters of political note had fatally alienated the majority of the population, and the U.S. public as well, leading to the downfall of his regime, the collapse of the U.S. political policy in Vietnam, and to subsequent advances in the countryside by the Viet Cong which have never been fully recovered.)

Why were these conditions stated by the President in his guidance to his ambassador and in his communication to Diem so quickly (and, it finally appeared fatally) abandoned?" The answer, once again, would seem to lie in the network of pressures and expectations raised by Kennedy's crisis decision-making through/1961. ^{out} Formerly these requirements of the Vietnamese regime were presented in a letter from Kennedy as a necessary quid pro quo for the U.S. aid being offered; and the offer of aid was in turn a response to a formal request from Diem, which would seem to underline the unreasonableness of demanding a quid pro quo.

(2) But what made it possible for Diem to reject this interpretation of the situation was the precise background of Diem's request: Mainly, his belief, shared not only by most Vietnamese but by many Americans, that the security of his country had been immediately reduced by developments in Laos reflecting U.S. deliberate policy, and that

his own confidence in the ultimate security of his country had been reduced by his interpretation, again, shared by many, of U.S. policy decisions not only in Laos, but in other areas, including undoubtedly the Bay of Pigs and the Berlin war. The immediate occasion and the cause for the urgency, for a public renewal of the U.S. commitment was precisely the fact that reassurance was needed and was owing to Diem (and other allies) in the wake of these Presidential decisions. From the point of view held by Diem, by U.S. policy makers, and ultimately, no doubt, by the President himself, new U.S. undertakings and commitments were themselves the quid pro quo to Diem for U.S. actions that had raised apprehension and undermined security of his borders. We were not, in a word, in a strong bargaining position to demand further recompense from Diem for our actions; especially so because as Diem knew (although the U.S. public did not) what we were offering in compensation for these earlier actions was less than what Diem himself, accepting some loss of dignity and face, had requested.

Furthermore, the quid pro quo which we were demanding from Diem took the form of political concessions which in his eyes both underlined the reliability of his continued rule and questioned the competence of his political and administrative judgment and capacity. To press such points strongly at that particular moment was sharply to undermine what was regarded by all as the major aim of the U.S. undertakings; to reassure Diem of our confidence in him and continued backing for his regime. In the context of on-going developments in Laos, the twin goals of achieving political concessions from the Diem regime and of reassuring Diem of the strength of the U.S. commitment to him

through his regime were simply incompatible; and in the context described earlier, Kennedy was in no position to give precedence to the former goal, however essential to some of his advisors and perhaps he himself may have regarded it to be. Thus, the moment passed that offered the best, and perhaps the last opportunity for the exertion of major U.S. leverage to achieve liberal concessions from the Diem regime.

In sum, so long as the Laos negotiations dragged on inconclusively and the Berlin crisis simmered the President could neither withhold commitment and some increased involvement from Vietnam nor move forward there indecisively. With respect to SVN in the fall of 1961 it could be said that President Kennedy was commitment-prone, but troop-shy. If the Laotian crisis had not come earlier than Viet Cong pressure in Vietnam (and this was in a sense quite possible, for the Laotian crisis appeared to have erupted largely as a result of U.S. policies neither related to Vietnam nor historically inevitable) Kennedy might well have accepted the view that the security problems raised by Laos and Vietnam were closely linked and called for a coordinated policy; If the choice were strongly to defend the viability of SVN (and Thailand) the argument for holding fast in Laos as well was very strong; but if it were acceptable to seek a political . . . solution, with the probability of Communist domination in Laos (in preference to major U.S. involvement), the same reasoning could suggest limited objectives and commitment in SVN, with tacit acceptance of a political settlement there as well. There is no strong evidence that Kennedy might have been tempted to such a solution for SVN, as he was for Laos; but the point is noted here for analytical purposes that if he had been

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so tempted (perhaps from a view on the intractability of the problem, not probably from any notion that U.S. interests in the area were negligible) he would have been considerably freer to impelment such an appreoach had he not dragged the heavy chain behind him of earlier decisions in SEA, Cuba and Berlin.

2. Vicious Cycles in Vietnam: Political vs. Military Factors.

[On this subject, as the others, detailed documentation is needed and is available. This first draft is a quick top-of-the-head survey based on a reading of the materials to lay out the main points on paper as a preliminary step.]

In 1960 and 1961, U.S. Mission and CIA analyses of the challenges to stability of the Diem regime always described the main problems as two-fold: the threat of coups, demonstrations or upheavals based upon non-Communist opposition elements in cities, Army or bureaucracy rebelling against the nature and limitations of Diem family rule, and on the other hand, the threat of spreading Communist insurgency in the countryside, stimulated, guided and supported from NVN but deriving most of its energy and resources from within SVN. In various estimates, one or the other of these threats was given precedence in immediacy or ultimate significance, with the non-communist political/coup threat given first place in several accounts.

The two threats were regarded as reinforcing each other, although they remained in important ways independent and separate problems. Loss of government control in the countryside and demonstrated incompetence or rigidity in dealing with the Communist world threat was regarded as one (the only one) complaint against the regime even among urban oppositionist groups and ^{the} bureaucracy and Army aggravated their unrest which reflected other grievances as well. On the other hand, the threat of an imminent coup, which plagued Diem even before but, in particular, after the nearly-successful November 1960 attempt, was clearly a limiting factor on Diem's ability to deal appropriately

and effectively with the world threat; for example, it compelled him to assign such posts as Province and District Chiefs on the basis of political reliability more than (it was charged) competence, to divide command and responsibility for rural operations between the military and civil authorities, to centralize authority in his own hands rather than to delegate to a coordinated military field command and made him even more reluctant to share power with representatives of oppositionist groups (although their lack of participation in the government was one of their major grievances). Moreover, it was assumed that the chaos following a successful or even a major abortive coup attempt would be exploited heavily by the Communists). Nevertheless, these two kinds of problems came from different sources and on the surface called for different techniques of solution. Each seemed urgent; neither could be ignored; indeed, the question posed by several analyses was: which oppositionist elements in the society would bring down the Diem regime first -- the rural communists or the urban/bureaucratic/ARVN non-communists? The deadline for one or the other of these challenges was never put, in 1960 through 1961, more than six months to a year off. That time horizon, in itself, did not define the situation as a crisis in Washington; but the period within which remedial measures might be taken with significant chance of avoiding this combination was set much smaller: by October 1961 it was measured in weeks or months, and Presidential decision urgent.

From this point of view of a dual threat a broad political military program was called for; in the face of such analyses, it would not have made sense to invest heavily in measures addressed to one threat

while preparing a defense against the other. And, in the program proposed in the President's message to Diem in November 1961, both sides of the _____ were given virtually equal emphasis. The direct aid which the US was about to give was most welcomed by the military campaign in the countryside against the communist insurgency. But, in turn for such increased military aid, it was stipulated that the Diem government should take those measures on the political front that (Washington thought) were essential to stabilize the regime against the dissatisfactions of non-communist opposition. The latter included partly broadened character of the national government to include representatives of various factions within SVN including oppositionists, increased freedoms including freedom of the press, and delegations of civil and military authority that would both improve the efficiency of government action and remove major courses of dissatisfaction in the bureaucracy and military commands. Yet, when Diem essentially rejected each of these major political demands the U.S. failed to press them, proceeding nevertheless to carry out its program of increased military aid. The effect was that the U.S. in its influence and its aid, and the GVN, both focused attention in 1962 upon a rural, primarily military/police program directed against the Communist insurgency in the countryside, without attacking directly a coup/demonstration threat to stability that had been forecast with considerable emphasis in 1960 and 1961 (warnings that were underlined by the actual coup attempts in Nov 1960 and the bombing of the Presidential palace in Feb 1962). How did this come about? To what extent were decision-

makers conscious of this trend in policy, and to what extent did they deliberately accept or rationalize it? How did it work out? What else might have been done? What other choices were available, and how might they be avoided?

These questions required poignancy by the fact that two years later the Diem regime and with it the U.S. counter insurgency program likely shared by parties from the quarter(?) - that the above suggestions had been at least guaranteed. Most communist urban elements were excluded from effective participation in the government. Other urban groups alienated by the behavior of the Diem Government (particularly in its response to the protests from the first group) including large parts of the bureaucracy and their own forces. The failure in U.S. _____ policy did seem, at first glance, small and clear. However, the proponents of the policy as it evolved in late 1961 and late 1962 would have claimed then that they had not left the political threat unattended. The essence of a rationale for the policy as it finally emerged appeared in an NIE of 15 Aug 1961 which, although it described the two sources of challenges in much the same terms as a SI NIE of one year later (which had tended to emphasize the non-communist threat "aggravated" by the communist insurgency):

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"The chief problem confronting the GVN is how to resolve the conflicting needs of a highly centralized government control for effective anti-guerrilla measures on the one hand and of liberalized, more democratic political attitudes for greater public support of the government on the other."

However, they gave main emphasis to the threat in the countryside and deprecated the possibilities of alleviating the political problems by U.S. influence on Diem.

"It is unlikely that Diem will undertake real political reforms in an effort to meet the complaints of the non-communist groups in Saigon and the military and civilian officials. In any case, Diem probably could not make enough political changes to satisfy the demands for reform by the opposition groups among the urban intellectuals."

Diem was simply unlikely, even under U.S. pressure to broaden his regime or increase freedoms very much. Moreover, it was doubtful that any thing he could do would end the complaints of oppositionist groups.

This judgment correctly foresaw Diem's reluctance to meet demands for political change, although it can be said that that reluctance was tested severely by U.S. pressures as distinct from verbal requests or suggestions. If the implication were accepted, however, that no U.S. pressure was likely to produce change in this front, the question would then be; What is the likelihood of success in stabilizing and securing the non-Communist Diemist regime in the absence of such political change? And is it possible to compensate for shortcomings in this sphere and measures in the military or rural security area? The answer implied to this latter question was affirmative.

"The degree of dissatisfaction among the peasants and the military and civilian officials is related directly to the success or failure of GVN efforts against Viet Cong guerrilla and

and subversive activity. Improvements in the internal security situation would do more, at least in the short run, toward reducing discontent among the peasants, the military and the civil servants than political reforms at the national level."

The clear inference for policy is that action directed against the rural security threat would be effective against both the two sources of danger: in fact, it would be the best policy available in the short run even against the non-communist oppositionist pressure (although the estimate does not quite go so far as to answer the question whether such an approach would be in the longer run adequate against this pressure.)

This understanding did not fully determine the policy approach reflected in the President's letter to Diem in November. That estimate continued to stress the urgency of political reform. Yet, it did rationalize the policy aimed almost exclusively at rural/military programs that resulted from Diem's refusal to carry out the undertakings suggested in the President's letter, and this analysis may be foreshadowed by what would become the dominant explicit rationale of U.S. policy. It seems likely that it corresponded closely to the appreciation of the situation in U.S. military circles in Vietnam and Washington where it was believed "security is the problem", "the threat is in the countryside and the cure was military offensive action supplemented by rural counter insurgency programs." Simultaneously with Diem's refusal

to implement the reforms regarded as important by the State Department and perhaps the White House, the process was underway of shifting primary U.S. influence upon the Vietnamese conflict to the Department of Defense. A major aspect of this was the creation of COMUSMACV in Saigon as a 4-star general post with direct access to Diem, overall responsibility for counterinsurgency efforts, and direct military channels to Washington; meanwhile, Kennedy's recent biographers all report a deliberate decision by Rusk to regard Vietnam as primarily a military problem under the concern of the DOD. In any case, dominant influence came increasingly to be in military and DOD, where, when the political problems were seen at all, military action against rural insecurity was still seen as the primary instrument for dealing with them (as suggested in the above NIE).

The theory implicit in the above analysis had its test in 1962-1963. Military support and advice, and the jointly-supported strategic hamlet program in the countryside did act to improve the security situation -- in the eyes of both U.S. and Vietnamese participants -- significantly by early 1963 over conditions a year earlier. Despite this improvement -- indicated above as the primary method of reducing non-communist discontent -- non-communist discontent erupted in the Spring of 1963, flared still higher and ~~direct in an~~ showed its true intensity and breadth in the late summer as the Diem regime reacted with quick rigidity and insensitivity to the early symptoms and proceeded, through the channels unforeseen in the above analyses of the US and ARVN, to destroy the regime in the fall.

THE CHALLENGE TO US-VIETNAM POLICY IN 1961

By the late fall of 1961, U.S. policy toward Vietnam was seen by Washington decision-makers as in a crisis state (though one less critical than Berlin, nuclear testing, or even Laos, at that same time) calling for urgent/decisions. But all through 1961 it had been taken for granted in policy discussions in Washington concerning Vietnam that high-level changes in policy were soon demanded, for the reason that ultimately underlies most crises: the increasing likelihood that past and current policies would meet open failure of their aims. A reexamination either of those aims, or of the policies, instruments and tactics being used to achieve them could no longer be postponed, if the U.S. were to avert that failure, and in particular, to escape the consequences of publicly evident, unequivocal failure.

The official, internal goal (not always, then as now, given highest emphasis in public statements) around which U.S. policy for Vietnam had been shaped, was to deny South Vietnam to communist control. Higher interests of the U.S. were believed to require that no regime controlled by communists, pro-communists, or highly vulnerable to communist influence or take-over should come to power in Saigon, by any means, whether peaceful, subversive or violent (although the damage to our interests of a successful communist takeover would be the greater the more it relied upon the naked, overt use of force). Publicly, of course, we emphasized our support to the GVN against aggression across its borders or subversion directed from outside; but our interests were broader than that, as shown by our support for Diem's refusal to cooperate in holding nationwide

elections on reunification in 1955 and 1956 or even to discuss terms for holding such elections.

President Eisenhower expressed publicly the aims of our policy in his October 1954 letter promising aid to Diem: "to assist the Government of Viet-Nam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means."

Among the elements of the policy by which we had been seeking to achieve these ends were:

a. Near total reliance upon Diem, as the focus of political power within Vietnam and as the executor of Vietnamese or jointly-agreed policies.

b. Acceptance (with some private reservations, occasionally expressed to Diem) of Diem's political approach, which included reliance upon family rule; administration highly centralized in the hands of himself and his family; personal control exercised in large part through a semi-covert apparatus, the Con Lao (which he had set up partly upon American advice); the crushing of armed opposition by force and bribery; heavily rigged elections for the Assembly and the Presidency, although less spectacular victories could almost surely have been achieved without rigging; the exclusion of most elements of political opposition from participation in power either in the Assembly or the Cabinet; and the progressive limitation of freedoms of speech, the press, and of political activity.

c. The exertion of U.S. influence, where we disagreed with aspects of his policy or political approach or when we wished Diem to take new initiatives, mainly through suggestion and persuasion rather than by pressure, the withholding of aid, or hard bargaining.

I do not think that the Con Lao was set up by upon American advice. Nhu was obsessed by communist efficiency and communist techniques. He thought he could beat them by borrowing their techniques but with a superior philosophy: Personalism. - His strategy was to create a front: The National Revolutionary movement controlled by

a semi secret front: the Con Lao. All this was concocted during the spring of 1955 by Nhu and a number of former non communist Viet Minh, the most prominent being Tran Chanh Thuan -

d. Observance of the letter of the Geneva Agreements of 1954, precluding a bilateral defense treaty, U.S. combat forces or more than some 685 military "advisors."

e. Military aid consisting primarily of support for the Vietnamese military budget (financed through economic aid, primarily the Commodity Import Program), participation in training, and the limited field advisory system; from 1955 through 1960, our influence on force structure, plans, and training had aimed primarily at building South Vietnamese capabilities to resist a conventional invasion from North Vietnam.

f. An economic aid program whose effect, recognized and accepted by the U.S., was to sustain a relatively high standard of living within Vietnam in the interests of short term political stability, rather than to channel resources into investment or long term development.

g. A political strategy in Laos, since the end of the '50's, aimed at the predominance of a right wing, anti-Communist government, which had led to both North Vietnam/Pathet Lao and neutralist counter-pressures increasingly supported by the Soviet Union, while the U.S. limited its involvement to covert means and a small, unacknowledged military advisory presence. By 1959-60, Laos was increasingly providing a channel for infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam.

By mid-1960, the above policy was failing, both in overall aims, and with respect to each one of the component elements above. The U.S.-backed regime, far from appearing "viable," looked highly vulnerable in the short run to overthrow either by communist pressure in the countryside or by non-communist political opposition. An intelligence estimate on

c. Increasing use of infiltration routes in Laos for both personnel and critical materiel for the insurgency.

d. Increasing alienation by the Diem regime of non-communist blocs within South Vietnam, by virtue of the character and methods of the Diemists, with growing pressure for a change in government.

e. Administrative shortcomings of the civil service under Diem.

f. Unreadiness of the Vietnamese armed forces to meet a guerrilla challenge--in terms of organization, training, or orientation-- and indeed, strong limitations in terms of leadership and morale on its ability to act effectively against any challenge.

g. Growing pessimism, both in the people, the bureaucratic/military structure, and the high leadership in Vietnam about the ability of the regime to withstand the communist challenge, reflecting both doubts on the competence and leadership of the Diem government, and increasingly in 1960 and 1961 (partly because of U.S. policy in Laos) doubts on the determination of the U.S. to prevent a communist takeover.

In short, the U.S. policy, as described above, had failed to deter a renewed communist drive to take over South Vietnam, and had failed to create a regime in South Vietnam with sufficient political support, military/policy strength, or political/administrative competence to confront that challenge confidently. As in 1954 just before Geneva, again in 1955, and 10 years later in late 1964, Ho Chi Minh had reason for confidence in the early fulfillment of his hopes formed in the 1920's for a united, Communist Vietnam: whether achieved directly or via a period of chaos or a weak neutralist regime. Virtually no one within the U.S. Government argued in 1961 that a continuation of current U.S.

Nothing

policy in all its aspects would reliably block this communist ambition: that is, would sustain past U.S. goals. All recognized as the issue: whether to modify those goals, or to change the direction and scale of U.S. efforts.

Among the separate matters raised for decision in this context were:

a. U.S. stakes in the conflict in South Vietnam, and their relative importance in worldwide and domestic political terms: The strategic and symbolic significance of South Vietnam to the defense and political evolution of Southeast Asia; the importance of denying Southeast Asia as a whole to communist influence or rule; the symbolic and political impact of U.S. policy and its degree of success in Southeast Asia on our allies and adversaries outside the area. By late 1961, these matters required renewed reexamination in the light of a U.S. policy in Laos aimed increasingly toward the neutralization of Laos by political settlement.

b. Policy towards Diem: Whether to continue to back Diem exclusively, or to by-pass him, or encourage alternatives; whether to continue to rely upon official persuasion to influence him, to enhance personal influence upon him by sending out U.S. representatives (who might be personally effective), or increasingly to use leverage, pressures and threats to broaden the regime, decentralize command, change military and civil policies and reform administration.

c. The U.S. role with respect to the government and the insurgency: Whether to continue as advisors and providers of financial and logistic aid, to use leverage more actively on operational decisions, to provide more direct combat support, or to move toward partnership or even take-over in military and some civil decision-making.

d. The relative importance of political vs. military factors in stabilizing the regime and countering the insurgency: What political changes and reforms, if any, were highly important or essential to (1) stability of the regime, (2) the effectiveness of the regime in carrying out civil and military programs, or (3) shifting the balance of popular support in the countryside away from the guerrillas and toward the government; what was the likelihood of achieving such changes and reforms, under the Diem regime, by given means, or by any means; if change was infeasible under Diem, what did this imply for U.S. policy with respect to Diem and with respect to South Vietnam; and how far could military or other approaches compensate for the lack of such political development. Related to such questions was the issue of relative importance in determining and controlling U.S. policy of the State Department vs. the Department of Defense in Washington and of the Ambassador vs. the Chief U.S. Military Representative in Saigon.

e. The possible use of U.S. combat forces: What their role and aims might be; how and where they might be employed; how many were needed immediately; how many might be called for ultimately; and what negative effects might result from introducing them.

f. The relation of Laos policy to Vietnam: How seriously to take the infiltration threat; the impact upon infiltration and confidence and morale within South Vietnam of various political solutions or forms of partition within Laos; the need for and prospects of using U.S. troops within Laos to prevent communist takeover or to block infiltration; the feasibility of handling Laos, South Vietnam, and Thailand as separate policy problems.

In the discussion below of the way the U.S. decision-making process worked in 1961 to resolve these issues, the following themes seem to deserve emphasis:

(1) The impact of Presidential policy with respect to Laos -- as it emerged in the late spring of 1961 -- upon the Presidential programs for Vietnam in May 1961 and, particularly, in November 1961: both in the strength of the enhanced commitment, its nature and timing, and in the limitations imposed upon our involvement.

(2) The gradual downgrading of the importance and feasibility of political reforms aimed at broadening support for the Diem regime; the reduction of U.S. pressures for such reforms, in favor primarily of U.S. military support and a predominantly military Diemist strategy against the insurgency.

(3) The decision to continue to back Diem unreservedly; to work to restore Diem's confidence in U.S. backing and resolve; and to soft-pedal the use of leverage pressure or insistence on "partnership" at top levels, in favor of increased U.S. advisory presence at lower levels, with some hope of bypassing Saigon in supporting and influencing subordinate Vietnamese elements.

(4) The decision to treat Laos and South Vietnam essentially as separate problems, justifying disparate and somewhat conflicting policies.

(5) The ultimate discrepancies between the Presidential policy emerging in November and December 1961 and the policies recommended by high-level advisors either in State or Defense Departments. In effect, the President reasserted U.S. commitment to pre-existing aims, and considerably increased U.S. involvement by increasing advisors and combat support, while

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avoiding or foregoing everyone of the elements urged by one or another high level advisors as essential to adequate chances of success: e.g., U.S. combat forces; Vietnamese political and administrative reforms; changes in ARVN command organization; strengthened U.S. leverage or partnership in decision-making; U.S. combat forces in Laos.